

KNOWLEDGE AND CONSUMPTION OF PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES BY NURSING STUDENTS

Conhecimento e consumo de substâncias psicoativas por estudantes de enfermagem

Conocimiento y consumo de sustancias psicoativas por estudiantes de enfermería

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to evaluate the consumption and knowledge about psychoactive substances of nursing academics of a public university. **Method:** quantitative study, carried out with students of the Nursing course of a federal public university. The data collected from the printed form were evaluated and classified through the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 23.0. **Results:** substance use by students was led by alcohol (80%), followed by hypnotic-sedatives (12%), marijuana (11%) and tobacco (10%). There was significant alcohol consumption in the month prior to the interview (29%). As for theoretical knowledge, the majority of respondents aged between 17 and 25 (34.5%) reported reading more than three texts on the topic. **Conclusion:** the problem of substance use is a topic of interest among nursing students despite the pattern of reported consumption of alcohol and tobacco in the same population.

Descriptors: Abuse of psychoactive substances; Education nursing; Students nursing.

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RESUMO

Objetivo: avaliar o consumo e o conhecimento sobre substâncias psicoativas de acadêmicos de enfermagem de uma universidade pública.

Método: estudo quantitativo, realizado com discentes do curso de Enfermagem de uma universidade pública federal. Os dados coletados a partir de formulário impresso foram avaliados e classificados através do *Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS)* versão 23.0. **Resultados:** o uso de substâncias por estudantes foi liderado pelo álcool (80%), seguido de hipnótico-sedativos (12%), maconha (11%) e tabaco (10%). Houve consumo relevante do álcool no mês anterior a entrevista (29%). Quanto ao conhecimento teórico, a maioria dos entrevistados entre 17 e 25 anos (34,5%) referiu leitura de mais de três textos sobre o tema.

Conclusão: a problemática do uso de substâncias figura como tema de interesse entre os estudantes de enfermagem apesar do padrão de consumo declarado de álcool e tabaco na mesma população.

Descritores: Abuso de substâncias psicoativas; Educação em enfermagem; Estudantes de enfermagem.

RESUMÉN

Objetivo: evaluar el consumo y el conocimiento sobre sustancias psicoactivas de académicos de enfermería de una universidad pública.

Método: estudio cuantitativo, realizado con discentes del curso de Enfermería de una universidad pública federal. Los datos recolectados a partir de un formulario impreso fueron evaluados y clasificados a través del *Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS)* versión 23.0. **Resultados:** el uso de sustancias por estudiantes fue liderado por el alcohol (80%), seguido de hipnótico-sedantes (12%), marihuana (11%) y tabaco (10%). Hubo consumo relevante del alcohol en el mes anterior a la entrevista (29%). En cuanto al conocimiento teórico, la mayoría de los entrevistados entre 17 y 25 años (34,5%) refirió la lectura de más de tres textos sobre el tema. **Conclusión:** la problemática del uso de sustancias figura como tema de interés entre los estudiantes de enfermería a pesar del patrón de consumo declarado de alcohol y tabaco en la misma población.

Descriptorios: Abuso de sustancias psicoactivas; Educación en enfermería; Estudiantes de enfermería.

INTRODUCTION

Drugs are a public health issue due to the wide and undifferentiated potential they have, with an important impact on social dynamics. Bearing this in mind, health education on psychoactive substances is widely used in teaching-learning environments. Discussions at the family level on the topic have been frequent, in order to educate young people about the harmful effects of drug use.¹ Nevertheless, such measures do not guarantee individuals' refusal to use these substances.

In Brazil, there has been a tendency, since the 1980s, to increase the use of marijuana, inhalants, cocaine and crack, especially in large urban centers, where there is a constant and accessible supply.² As for the first contact with drugs, this occurs usually in adolescence, a period characterized by rapid changes, along with the construction of personal identity based on emancipation from the family. In this period, the use of psychoactive substances is seen as an alternative to alleviate the tension experienced in the age group, with the practice being repeated at parties,

reflecting for greater vulnerability to experimentation with alcohol and other drugs.³ The trajectory of drugs begins in adolescent life and by lawful ways as in the case of tobacco use, however, there are previous negative influences from family backgrounds where drug use is experienced.⁴

Specialists claim that adolescents are the part of the population most vulnerable to risk factors, and this is due not only to social inequality or lack of material resources, but also due to weakened bonds of belonging, violence, loss of fundamental rights, high school failure rate, lack of professional perspectives, early insertion into the world of work, among others.⁵

Furthermore, the behavior of using the drug repeatedly is corroborated by the influence of third parties, by indirect social pressure through the exposure of substances and facilitation of the environment for use, as well as in response to negative feelings of fear and anxiety.⁶ Therefore, the problem of drugs during youth appears as a complex phenomenon and anchored in risk factors that range from the family to the characteristics and individual feelings of the user.

Concerning the undergraduate students, they are more susceptible, because in this stage of life it is common to face situations of cognitive and affective conflicts that are not properly handled. There is also more prominent access to psychoactive substances and the practice of multiple use of substances to potentiate desired effects.⁷ This group then represents the focus of study and intervention, since drug abuse impairs the individual's training and professionalization.

Given the aforementioned, the production of scientific knowledge on the subject becomes valid, as well as the importance of warning about the danger of consuming psychoactive substances and its consequences. Hence, this study meant to assess the comprehension and use of psychoactive substances by nursing undergraduates from a public university.

METHODS

It is a descriptive and cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach, which was performed with students of the Nursing Graduation Course from a federal public university located in the Northeastern region of Brazil. The sample consisted of 125 participants selected from the total population of students aged 18 years old or more, enrolled in the course at the time of data collection for all semesters, with 13 participants being excluded due to poor completion of the instrument.

Data collection took place over the period from April to August 2017, through a printed form prepared by the researchers, containing questions about demographic data, living experiences with drug users, the pattern of substance use and self-assessment regarding the search for knowledge regarding the subject. The data were entered into Microsoft Excel, exported and processed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS)*, version 23.0). The obtained

results were presented in tables and graphs descriptively, and analyzed according to the theoretical framework of this study.

The study was authorized by the Nursing Department and approved by the Research Ethics Committee from the *Universidade Federal do Piauí (UFPI)*, under the Legal Opinion No. 1.806.591, on November 4th, 2016. It also followed all the ethical principles guiding studies involving human beings, as addressed in the Resolution No. 466/2012 from the National Health Council.⁸

RESULTS

The sample studied was comprised by young people within the age group from 17 to 25 years old (84.8%). There was a predominance of females (80.8%) and students enrolled in the fifth semester of the Nursing Graduation Course, according to data in **Table 1**.

Table 1 - Sample characterization in regard to age, gender and present-day semester. da *Teresina* city, *Piauí* State, 2017 (n=125).

| Variable | No. | (%) | |
|-----------------|--------------|-----|-------|
| Age (years old) | 17 - 25 | 106 | 84.8% |
| | 25 - 43 | 18 | 14.4% |
| | 43 - 51 | 1 | 0.8% |
| Gender | Male | 24 | 19.2% |
| | Female | 101 | 80.8% |
| Semester | 1st Semester | 27 | 21.6% |
| | 2nd Semester | 12 | 9.6% |
| | 3rd Semester | 12 | 9.6% |
| | 4th Semester | 16 | 12.8% |
| | 5th Semester | 28 | 22.4% |
| | 7th Semester | 22 | 17.6% |
| | 8th Semester | 8 | 6.4% |

Source: Research data.

When asked about the search for knowledge related to the subject, most of the interviewees aged between 17 and 25 years old (34.5%) reported reading more than three texts on the theme, especially female students (35.1%) and those enrolled in the first semester of the Nursing Graduation Course (43.3%) (**Table 2**). Regarding the use of some type of psychoactive substance at least once in their lives, alcohol led the preference of students (80%), followed by hypnotic-sedatives (12%), marijuana (11%) and tobacco (10%).

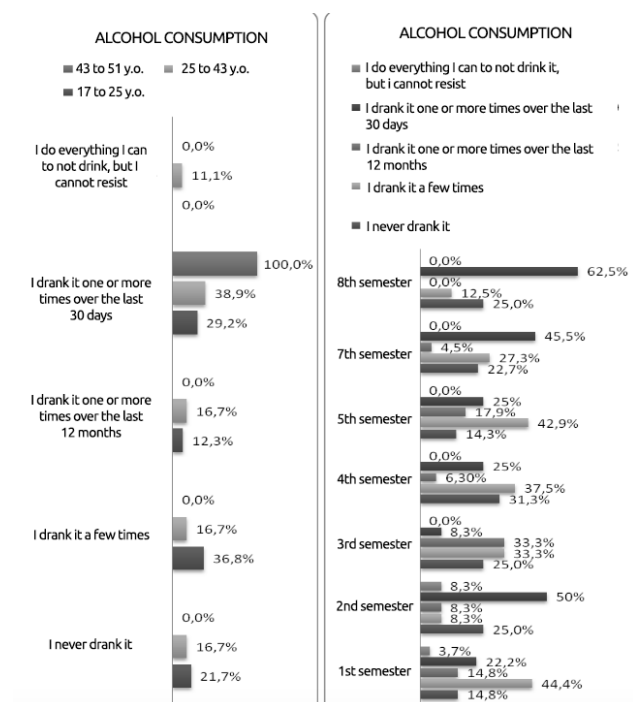
Table 2 - Students' understanding in regard to psychoactive substances accumulated over the last year, according to their age, gender and semester. *Teresina* city, *Piauí* State, 2017 (n=125).

| Did you read texts about psychoactive substances over the last year? | More than 3 % | 2 or 1 % | None % |
|--|---------------|----------|--------|
| Age (years old) | | | |
| 17 - 25 | 34.5 | 57.8 | 7.8 |
| 25 - 43 | 38.9 | 50.0 | 11.1 |
| 43 - 51 | 100 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Gender | | | |
| Male | 37.5 | 62.5 | 0% |
| Female | 35.1 | 55.0 | 9.9% |
| Semester | | | |
| 1st Semester | 43.3% | 50.0% | 6.7% |
| 2nd Semester | 53.3% | 40.0% | 6.7% |
| 3rd Semester | 64.3% | 28.6% | 7.1% |
| 4th Semester | 31.3% | 50.0% | 18.8% |
| 5th Semester | 10.7% | 78.6% | 10.7% |
| 7th Semester | 21.7% | 73.0% | 4.3% |
| 8th Semester | 55.6% | 44.4% | 0.0% |

Source: Research data.

Concerning the pattern of alcohol consumption, a representative part of the sample reported using either one or more times over the last 30 days (31.2%), and they belonged to the seventh semester.

Figure 1 - Pattern of alcohol consumption by age group and present-day semester.



Source: Direct research.

Tobacco was used only a few times (8.8%), especially by younger participants (8.1%). Most of the students who mentioned that it is possible to live without using a psychoactive substance, and that they would go to parties that do not offer alcohol, also have confirmed relevant consumption of this substance in the last month (29%).

DISCUSSION

Herein, the predominant use of alcohol among young people was evidenced, as well as the substance that leads consumption in other groups of university students who drink alcohol as a way to soften the activities imposed by academic life.⁹ The study population did not mention importance in the use of crack, however, it is known that the substance characterizes a public health problem, since in Brazil 0.7% of the general population does consume drugs; and in the group of illicit drugs, their consumption is second only to marijuana and solvents, which were highlighted in this study.²

Among the factors related to substance use by university students, the literature highlights the dissatisfaction with interpersonal relationships, in addition to the search for acceptance, and confrontation with social isolation. These emotional demands encourage the search for drugs to relieve social pressure, which declines the user's self-control, instigating losses in various health and social aspects.¹⁰ Attitudes considered characteristic of the age group and related to the vulnerability of drug use, since, the relationship between peers and the segregation of groups prevent relationships and the construction of common projects.⁵

Concerning the substances of choice, alcohol and tobacco are the most common in the sample under study, with concomitant use with a second one being a reality. Cigarette emerged as the second substance of choice; a fact also seen in a group of university students in the United States of America. Researchers have shown that marijuana also appears as the second drug of choice among Brazilian university students, with frequent use in males and followed by tranquilizers, inhalants, hallucinogens, and amphetamines.¹¹ Worldwide, alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana are the main substances consumed by college students, related to an early age and lack of involvement of young people with cultural activities.¹²

Considering the participants of this study, it is observed that there is currently no active smoker, but younger ones have already tried tobacco, or referred to recurrent use of the substance. The low consumption of tobacco evidenced may be related to the age of the students, most of whom still live with their parents and are prohibited from using it. On the other hand, other studies highlight that, despite this condition, access to the university is added as a passport for the individual liberation of the family judgment, particularly for students who move away from their communities.³

The university population is heterogeneous, and each area of knowledge has its peculiarity, generating situations and experiences that may or may not favor abuse and the multiplicity of drug use and its risks. Concerning

nursing undergraduates, they should be encouraged to provide health education for the prevention of chemical dependency. Nonetheless, there is a failure related to the approach of this theme in the curricula, especially regarding the knowledge of screening, brief intervention, and referral for treatment of substance use.¹³ These failures can hinder the implementation of preventive drug care, concerning both patients and college students, who are quite vulnerable to the situation of chemical dependency.

Bearing in mind the aforesaid, attention is drawn to an issue that deserves to be investigated. Therefore, it is questioned if the training that nursing undergraduates obtain during graduation is capable of providing appropriate knowledge to prevent self-consumption, in addition to professional performance in health education related to chemical dependence.² As a protective factor, stimulating students' purposes and life projects stands out as a protective factor against alcohol consumption, then reducing this behavior.¹⁴

The analyzed data emphasize that there was a search for knowledge about the theme, especially by students in the first semester of graduation, characterizing interest in the theme. Nevertheless, the study identified that nursing undergraduates had significant alcohol consumption, which was 8.5 drinks per week. Marijuana and stimulants also showed excessive levels of consumption in this population, similar to groups of students participating in other studies.¹⁵

The problem of drug use among college students still seems to be unclear, even in the professional categories that raise aspects of education and prevention of drug use. Moreover, there is the stigmatizing aspect of drug abuse that delays the perception of the problem by those who are users. For this reason, the present study presented as difficulty the students' resistance to both participate and answer some questions.

CONCLUSION

This study has addressed the nursing undergraduates' search for knowledge about drugs, while there was an expression of consumption in the same population. Alcohol showed the more accentuated consumption pattern, followed by tobacco and marijuana.

Attention is drawn to the prevalence of psychoactive substances use in the university environment, which brings the need for pondering about the related risk and protection factors. Furthermore, the high consumption of alcohol and tobacco in the studied population underlines the importance of continuing socio-educational interventions that explain the complications of abuse and drug addiction, in addition to addressing the theme in the nursing graduation curriculum and other categories.

On the other hand, social awareness about the problem of drugs, through studies like this one, might propose more direct and severe action in the whole process of promoting physical and mental health, as well as preventing drug addiction. This guarantees the impact for the academic community, in the scope of teaching and researching.

It is also expected to increase the health students' awareness, given the attention of public policies aimed at activities that alert, remove and advocate the prevention concerning the consumption of legal and illegal drugs, and the comprehension about the consequences of such practices during academic training.

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